Selfie-centric phone among new Microsoft offerings (Update)

4 September 2014, by Frank Jordans

A woman shows the new Lumia 830 smart phone during a Microsoft Nokia presentation event at the consumer electronic fair IFA in Berlin, Thursday, Sept. 4, 2014. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)

Microsoft will seek to draw more people to its Internet-based services with two new mid-range smartphones it unveiled Thursday, including one designed to help people take better selfies.

The devices are under the Lumia brand Microsoft bought from Nokia. They run the latest version of Windows Phone 8 and feature Cortana, a Siri-like voice assistant available to help with directions, calendar appointments and messages. Many of those interactions will steer users to Microsoft services such as Bing search and OneDrive storage.

Chris Weber, Microsoft's vice president for mobile devices sales, insisted consumers should feel comfortable about storing their personal pictures on OneDrive, despite the recent exposure of celebrities' private pictures stored on rival Apple's cloud-based system.

"I think we have to amplify the message around security regarding these cloud services," Weber told reporters.

To this end, Microsoft is also giving users more control over the kind of information—friends, diaries, home address—that the Cortana voice assistant will have access to, he said.

Microsoft bought Nokia's phone business in April as it seeks to boost Microsoft's Windows Phone system, which has had little traction compared with Apple's iPhones and Google's Android system. Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella has made mobile phones and Internet-based services priorities for the company as its traditional businesses—Windows and Office software installed on desktops—slow down or decline.

Microsoft unveiled the new Lumia 730 and 830 phones at the IFA technology show in Berlin.

The handsets won't have all the technical advances found in Microsoft's pricier flagship, the Lumia 930 phone, which is known as the Lumia Icon in the United States. The 730's rear camera takes 6.7 megapixel shots, while the 830 is 10 megapixels. By contrast, the 930 phone is at 20 megapixels, one of the highest in a smartphone.

But the 730, in particular, will have features designed for better selfies and video calls. The front camera used for selfies will be 5 megapixels, higher than the 2 megapixels found in many phones.

For even better shots, it'll be possible to take selfies with the rear camera. Users won't be able to see themselves on the screen, but an app called Lumia Selfie will use face-detection technology and beeps to guide users on where to hold the camera. Samsung's upcoming Note phones will have a similar feature, along with software to stitch multiple shots on the front camera to fit more people in.

A man shows the new Lumia 830, left, and 730, right, smart phones during a Microsoft Nokia presentation event at the consumer electronic fair IFA in Berlin, Thursday, Sept. 4, 2014. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)

The latest Lumia devices will also pander to users' vanity, by offering functions to make them look slimmer, brighten teeth and widen tired eyes on photos they've taken.

The 830 has a 5-inch screen, measured diagonally and will cost about 330 euros ($435) before tax, compared with 440 euros for the Samsung Galaxy S5 and 515 euros for the iPhone 5.

The 4.7-inch 730 will cost 199 euros before tax. It will have 3G connectivity and slots for two SIM cards, an important feature in emerging markets where wireless plans vary widely such that users switch services often to get the best deals. A 4G version will be known as the 735 and will cost 219 euros before tax.

Microsoft, which bought Skype three years ago, is also throwing in three months of free international voice calls with every new purchase.

The new phones will start shipping in September, though not necessarily right away in all markets. Typically, Lumia phones make it to the U.S. under different model numbers.

Chris Weber, CVP, Mobile Devices Sales of Microsoft, presents the new Lumia Selfie App for their smart phones during his keynote speech during a Microsoft Nokia presentation event at the consumer electronic fair IFA in Berlin, Thursday, Sept. 4, 2014. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)

Among other new releases unveiled at the show:

— Lenovo is also coming out with phones aimed at better selfies.

The new Vibe Z2 phone has an 8 megapixel front camera, while the Vibe X2 will have 5 megapixels in the front. The phones will also have a feature that triggers the camera to snap the shot by smiling, blinking or making a "V" gesture.

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The phones will appear in China first, with expansion to other Asia-Pacific markets, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Lenovo has no plans to sell either in the U.S.

— Chinese firm Huawei is instead focusing on battery life with its Ascend Mate7 smartphone, which as 6-inch screen and a massive 4100 mAh battery.

Shao Yang, head of Huawei's marketing department, said even heavy users would get two days' work out of a full battery charge.

The Mate7 sports a fingerprint sensor on the back that can be used to unlock the phone. But while Samsung and Apple have already done this in their latest flagship phones, Huawei lets users associate the print on all fives fingers with a different function. This can be used to show something to a friend but hide private photos, for example.

Chris Weber, CVP, Mobile Devices Sales of Microsoft presents the new Lumia 730 and 735 smart phones during his keynote speech at a Microsoft Nokia presentation event at the consumer electronic fair IFA in Berlin, Thursday, Sept. 4, 2014. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)

A version with 16 gigabytes of storage will ship for 499 euros this fall in markets outside the U.S., while the 32 gigabytes version will sell for 599 euros.

—Taiwanese phone manufacturer HTC also unveiled a new flagship phone, in its mid-tier Desire series.

The Desire 820 comes with a fast processor similar to that found in the iPhone 5; an 8-megapixel front-facing camera for the increasingly important selfie function; and a 5.5-inch screen to show off the videos recorded with the 13-megapixel back camera.

It ships worldwide at the end of September and will cost about 329 euros, depending on the market.

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